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Panel on Welfare Services

**Background brief prepared by the Legislative Council Secretariat
for the meeting on 9 March 2009**

Integrated Family Service Centres

Purpose

This paper provides the background information on the implementation of the service delivery mode of the Integrated Family Service Centre (IFSC).

Background

2. In August 2000, the Social Welfare Department (SWD) commissioned the University of Hong Kong (HKU) to conduct an eight-month consultancy study on the review of family welfare services. The review covered major family services, viz. family services centre, senior social work practitioner, family life education service, family aide service, Family Activity and Resource Centre, Family Care Demonstration and Resource Centre cum Carers' Support Centre, family education and support services for single parent families and new arrivals under the Promoting Self-reliance Strategy package.

3. The findings and recommendations of the study are contained in the Report entitled "Meeting the Challenge : Strengthening Families" submitted by HKU in May 2001. One of the recommendations of the Report, among others, was the adoption of a new service delivery model of IFSC. An IFSC would comprise a Family Resource Unit, a Family Support Unit and a Family Counselling Unit to provide a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services.

4. At its meetings on 12 June 2000, 12 March and 9 July 2001, the Panel on Welfare Services (the Panel) discussed issues relating to the review of family services as well as the findings and recommendations of the consultancy study. The Administration advised that it was in full support of the recommended

direction in strengthening families through a child-centred, family-focused and community-based approach, with emphasis laid on establishing effective partnerships and interface with family-related services in creating a family-friendly environment in service delivery. The Administration also advised that it would adopt a bottom-up and gradual approach in launching the new model through a two-year pilot project in selected districts with an in-built evaluative study.

Implementation of IFSC pilot projects

5. As recommended by the consultant team, a Working Group on the Implementation of the Review of Family Services (Working Group), comprising representatives from the former Health, Welfare and Food Bureau, SWD, Social Welfare Advisory Committee, Hong Kong Council of Social Service, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and an independent member of the community, had been set up to give advice on the implementation of the IFSC pilot projects. To take forward the IFSC model, 15 IFSC pilot projects were selected by the Working Group in January 2002 to be implemented for two years from April 2002 to March 2004.

6. The HKU was also commissioned to conduct the two-year evaluative study of the pilot projects starting in April 2002.

7. At its meetings on 7 July and 10 November 2003, the Panel was briefed on the findings and recommendations of the Interim Report on the Implementation of the Review of Family Services submitted by the consultant team in May 2003. Findings of the evaluative study on the 15 IFSC pilot projects revealed high user satisfaction. The most noticeable aspect was that users no longer felt inhibited to come forward to seek assistance, for fear of being viewed as weak and useless. Members were informed that –

- (a) the Administration fully agreed that IFSC was a more desirable mode of service delivery than the traditional family services centres (FSCs);
- (b) the Administration aimed to transform all existing FSCs into IFSCs instead of a partial re-engineering with some FSCs operating in their conventional mode. The mode of transformation would either be merging or self-transformation;
- (c) FSCs/counselling units not having sufficient resources to form an IFSC would be allowed to pool resources from other family services including family life education service, family aide service, Family Support and Resource Centres, Post-migration Centres and

Single Parent Centres (SPCs). Pooling of resources beyond the family services might also be considered if this was so requested by the concerned NGOs; and

- (d) tentative implementation date for re-engineering existing FSCs/counselling units into IFSCs was set for April 2004.

8. In response to members' concern about staff implications, the Administration advised that the re-engineering exercise would not give rise to staff redundancy in SWD, as family service remained the core business of SWD. As regards the concern that staff working in smaller NGOs providing family services would be made redundant as larger NGOs would take up all the formation of IFSCs, the Administration advised that in order to help those smaller NGOs not having sufficient FSCs/counselling units resources to form an IFSC, it had proposed to allow them to pool other family service resources and/or resources beyond family services on request. The Administration also advised that the re-engineering exercise would not reduce allocation of resources to the welfare sector.

9. Members were supportive of the new IFSC model and did not object to the pooling of resources from FSCs/counselling units to form IFSCs, but they were of the view that funding for five SPCs should continue until there were findings to show that IFSCs could meet the needs of single parents. A letter conveying members' view was sent to the Director of Social Welfare by the Chairman of the Panel on behalf of members, and copied to the Financial Secretary.

10. The Administration advised that IFSCs could meet the needs of single parents, as evidenced by the findings of the 15 IFSC pilot projects. Given the varied and comprehensive family services provided by IFSCs, single parents were able to receive more services than they could receive at SPCs. Moreover, SWD had made clear with the agencies concerned from the outset that funding to SPCs was limited to three years from 1 February 2001 to 31 January 2004. It was the Administration's aim for support services for single parent families to be integrated with mainstream family services in the long run.

Implementation of IFSC service delivery mode

11. At its meeting on 9 May 2005, the Panel noted that the re-engineering of IFSCs was completed in 2005. Members were advised that subsequent to the re-engineering exercise, there were a total of 61 IFSCs (40 operated by SWD and 21 by NGOs) serving the whole territory and two integrated services projects operated by two NGOs in Tung Chung. An IFSC, comprising three major components, viz a family resource unit, a family support unit and a family

counselling unit, provided a continuum of preventive, supportive and remedial services to meet the changing needs of the families residing in the locality in a holistic manner. Deputations attending the meeting, however, told the Panel that IFSCs could not totally replace the service provided by SPCs which were closed in April 2004. They urged the Administration to re-commission NGOs to operate SPCs as they considered IFSCs could not meet their specific needs.

12. The Administration advised that although it was well aware that users of SPCs had a sense of belonging there, this should not prevent the Administration from working towards more effective and efficient use of resources through re-engineering of family resources into IFSCs. As compared with a traditional FSC/counselling unit, each IFSC has a stronger staffing support (at least 12 social workers in addition to a supervisor), and serves a smaller designated geographical boundary with a population of 100 000 to 150 000.

13. In response to the request for providing funding to SPCs for continuous operation, the Administration advised that the re-engineering of IFSCs had just been completed, and it was monitoring the operation of IFSCs, including their collaboration with other organisations. The Administration would make improvements where appropriate to ensure needs of various target groups, including single parents, were catered for. It was the Administration's intention to review the effectiveness of the operation of IFSCs one year after the completion of the re-engineering of IFSCs.

14. Members reiterated that they raised no objection to the pooling of family resources units to form IFSCs, but considered it regrettable that the Administration had ignored the request made by the Panel at the meeting on 10 November 2003 for the Administration to continue to fund SPCs until there were findings to support that IFSCs could meet the needs of single parents. The Panel looked forward to the Administration's response to the issue of the re-opening of SPCs after the completion of the review on IFSCs in one year's time.

15. The Administration subsequently advised in early 2008 that as the invitation of proposal for the review of IFSCs conducted between August and October 2007 has to be re-tendered, the earliest time to report progress to the Panel will be in the fourth quarter of 2008.

Latest Developments

16. According to the Administration, it has commissioned a consultancy study on the review of the implementation of IFSC service delivery mode. The review will be completed by the end of 2009, and it plans to revert to the Panel on the review findings in the first quarter of 2010.

Relevant papers

17. Members may wish to refer to the Administration's papers for the meetings of the Panel on 12 June 2000, 12 March and 9 July 2001, 7 July and 10 November 2003, and 9 May 2005 and the relevant minutes of meetings for details.

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